



# CIVIL SOCIETY AS THE ARENA OF THE NEW EUROPEAN\* CLIMATE HEGEMONY: A NEO-GRAMSCIAN APPROACH TO EUROPEAN GREEN TRANSITION

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## ■ Introduction

■ The relationship between the European Union and its emerging civil society has always been the subject of academic debates. As civil society was naturally built at the national level, the European construction process developed ways for European civil society to take shape. From the first election for the European Parliament that took place in 1979 to the Lisbon Treaty that provided a tool for participatory democracy called the European Citizens' Initiative (Sasvari 2015), the goals of European Platforms and Networks of NGOs were to impact the direction of the European Union's actions and development by highlighting the needs and ambitions of their clientele (Dirk 2012). Nowadays, as the effects of the European Green Deal (EGD) are impacting European society, the role of the organized European civil society will be to balance the ambitious climate goals with social fairness and inclusivity.

The need for protective social policies that should come together with the green transition (Zimmermann–Gengnagel 2023) emphasizes the role of the Platforms and Networks of NGOs in influencing the EGD by advocating for inclusive policies that take into consideration the needs of European citizens and vulnerable communities, ensuring that no one is left behind (Pianta and Lucchese 2020: 6). Vulnerable European citizens could turn to supporting populist parties and climate sceptical political leaders may slow down the green transition (Thalberg et al. 2024; Stegemann–Ossewaarde 2018). However, the role of the organized European civil society is not just to provide feedback for EU institutions in drafting new policies but also to ensure that a consensus for the green transition is reached between European citizens.

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## Literature review

This research uses a critical approach that will provide the theoretical framework to understand the complex relations between social forces shaping European policies and the role of civil society. The neo-Gramscian theory, rooted in the ideas of the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, focuses on the European integration process, stating that it is a project driven by dominant economic groups' interests by concepts like hegemony, social forces, civil society, or organic intellectuals. For example, Andreas Bieler (2005) suggests that neo-Gramscianism, using the concept of class struggle, provides deep insights into how the socio-economic agenda shapes European policies. Harald Köpping Athanasopoulos (2020) sees European integration as part of the global neoliberal hegemony where international capital benefits from this process in front of the broader societal interests. In this case, European integration is more than a process; it is assimilated with a hegemonic project that shapes social relations and public policies in favor of the elite interests. Bieler and Morton (2001) and Apeldoorn (2004) emphasized how neo-Gramscian theory has been applied to understand hegemony and structural changes in the European Union, while Levy and Egan (2003) explored how neo-Gramscian framework can be applied to corporate strategies, highlighting the intersection of capital, social forces, and state policies in environmental negotiations and providing an explanation on how European integration process is shaped by the corporate interests through regulatory frameworks.

Neo-Gramscian analysis views European integration as a political project that impacts all facets of EU social norms and identities, including economic policy, by acting as a transnational vehicle for capitalist hegemony. However, the EGD and the transition to a Net Zero society require a new hegemonic project to be shaped. At this point, Harald Winkler adapts the neo-Gramscian theory to understand the just transition process to a green European society. He applies and modifies some core concepts of Gramsci's thought, such as ideology, hegemony, change agents, and fundamental conditions to articulate a theory that understands just transition as an ideological element that will bring together coalitions of change agents (Winkler 2020: 1). The role of the change agents (such as trade unions, NGO Networks, social movements, governments, businesses, or international organizations) is basically to form an alliance and to reinforce a new cultural hegemony that supports moving away from high-carbon and inequality-driven economy (Winkler 2020: 8).

The concept of hegemony provided by neo-Gramscian theory allows the research to go beyond the traditional Marxist mechanisms of power in society. The relevance of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is particularly important today in the context of globalization and the dominance of neoliberal ideologies (Johnson 2007: 102–6), shaping the hegemonic model known as fossil capitalism (Huber 2009; Griffiths 2023). According to Cader and Sundrijo (2023), hegemony involves a more critical role of cultural and ideological factors over coercive power in constructing the people's collective will.



This is how the dominant classes maintain their leadership, creating common sense and projecting their interest as universal.

The contestation of the hegemonic fossil capitalism conducted by the change agents takes place in civil society. In the neo-Gramscian approaches, civil society is understood as a social realm that can drive social transformation and as a site where “hegemony is consented, sustained, reproduced and channeled, but also where counter-hegemonic and emancipatory forces also could emerge” (Icaza Garza 2006: 488). Therefore, civil society is more of a relational concept, where the hegemonic project is maintained or changed through consent rather than coercion (Rupert 1998: 431). As coercion is a feature of the national state, the European Union lacks this way of social intervention.

Going deeper into Antonio Gramsci’s political thinking, one can also find organic intellectuals who can be identified as change agents. The concept of organic intellectuals in neo-Gramscian theory positions specific individuals as crucial drivers in forming and maintaining a hegemonic structure. A simple definition is that organic intellectuals exercise leadership by organizing social hegemony (Evans 2005). In contrast with traditional intellectuals, who have their roots in a previous mode of production and continue to maintain their sphere of influence and structure in a context of significant changes in production and political and social organization (Silva 2022), organic intellectuals are deeply rooted in the structure of the class and actively contribute to shaping the direction and consciousness of their respective classes (Pijl 2005). Gramsci explains the identity of the organic intellectuals by stating that everyone has the potential to be an intellectual, even if not everyone fulfills the social role of an intellectual (Gramsci 1971). Therefore, organic intellectuals will be part of the change agents’ concept that can contribute to the new European climate hegemony.

To conclude, according to the neo-Gramscian theory, civil society is an arena where the contestation of the fossil capitalist hegemonic model takes place, while a new European climate hegemony of just transition may arise conducted by the change agents that joined the alliance, such as organic intellectuals, trade unions, NGO Networks, social movements, governments, businesses, or international organizations. At this point, the research question of this paper is formulated as follows: “Who are the change agents within European civil society that have aligned with the alliance, and how fostering a counter-hegemonic discourse against the traditional economic model?”

## Methodology

To answer the research question, this paper will employ qualitative content analysis to understand the commitment of the change agents in the transition process to a Net Zero economy. To achieve this, the change agents will be split into three categories: individuals (Climate Pact Ambassadors), organizations (NGOs,



Networks of NGOs, movements, trade unions, and political organizations), and private companies. The description, action plans, or public profiles of change agents will be examined using the qualitative content analysis method after an in-depth and structured process of coding and categorizing textual data to find patterns, themes, and meanings. This method involves collecting data from official websites like the European Climate Pact ('Meet Our Ambassadors', n.d.), where the profiles of 879 Climate Ambassadors are available as the research is performed in May 2024, or individual websites of all 43 organizations that joined the Alliance for Just Transition ('European Alliance for a Just Transition', n.d.) until May 2024. The results will be assessed using neo-Gramscianism as a critical theory of understanding the European integration process to emphasize the role of the change agents in promoting a just transition to a new European climate hegemony using civil society as an arena for contesting the present hegemonic structure of fossil capitalism.

## Analysis

The neo-Gramscian definition of civil society, as a realm where the formation of a new hegemonic project takes place, allows us to go beyond the traditional definition of civil society and to identify all the active actors in promoting a just transition. Following the research of Harald Winkler, the fundamental conditions for social and economic change will be achieved when change actors (social movements and NGOs, transnational corporations, firms, organized labor, states, cities, or intergovernmental organizations) that share similar visions, values, mindsets, or narratives will generate alliances of change agents coalescing around ideological elements and will gain the support of other actors (Winkler 2020: 6). As the paper is focused on consensus building for reaching a European climate hegemony and as the primary vehicle of change is the European Union through its member states, European citizens who are facing difficulties adapting to the new economic conditions might develop adversities to all these regulations. Therefore, the critical change actors that could mediate and achieve consensus building are individuals, NGOs (organizations, movements, networks, or political parties), businesses, and trade unions.

Regarding individual involvement, the most prominent role belongs to European Climate Pact Ambassadors (CPAs). They are key figures in the consensus-building process initiated by the European Commission and act on a voluntary base at the national and supranational levels. The European Climate Pact is a tool of the European Green Deal aiming to engage individuals, communities, and organizations in climate change mitigation activities and promote sustainable development. The role of the ambassadors is to inform, inspire, and support climate actions within their networks and communities ('Become a Pact Ambassador', n.d.). According to Jale Tosun, CPAs are crucial in promoting participatory governance and are a crucial component of the European Union's strategy for transitioning to sustainable development.



The European Green Deal's ambitious objective requires CPAs to play a crucial role in this transformation (Tosun 2022). They were selected based on their steadfast dedication to climate action, and, to maximize the impact of their climate advocacy, they must set an outstanding example, motivate others, and cultivate relationships (Tosun–Pollex–Crumbie 2023).

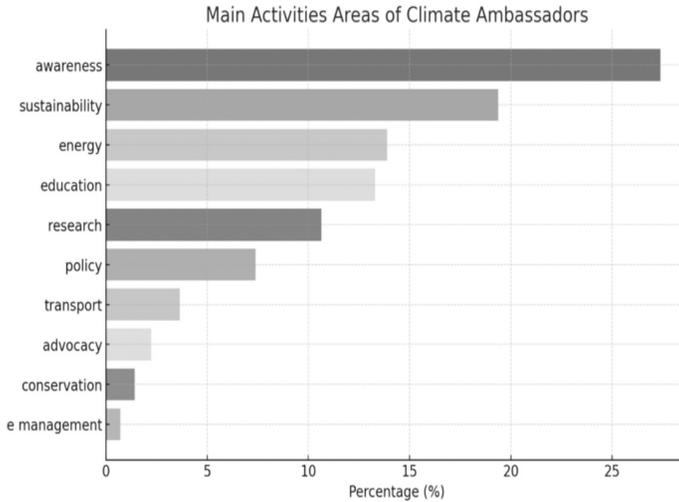
In another comprehensive study, Jale Tuson, Lucas Geese, and Irene Lorenzoni evaluated CPA profiles to determine how committed these individuals are to taking climate action. They discovered that CPAs represent both older and younger generations and that their perspectives on advocating for climate action can vary significantly. Older participants usually mention their worry for future generations as a significant incentive, whereas younger ambassadors are more likely to include their peers in climate projects directly (Tosun–Geese–Lorenzoni 2023). Nevertheless, the role of the ambassadors and their commitments will not make them genuine organic intellectuals in a Gramscian way unless they are not representative of their environment, and they are not performing a variety of activities related to climate change. At this point, the qualitative content analysis conducted on the public profiles of the CPAs ('Meet Our Ambassadors', n.d.) shows that the distribution of the ambassadors in national states is as follows: Italy – 13.49 percent, Spain – 12.06 percent, Germany – 8.66 percent, France – 7.68 percent, Greece – 5.92 percent, Belgium – 5.92 percent, Netherlands – 4.50 percent, Poland – 4.28 percent, Portugal – 4.28 percent, Romania – 3.40 percent, Bulgaria – 2.74 percent, Luxembourg – 2.63 percent, Austria – 2.52 percent, Hungary – 2.30 percent, Sweden – 2.19 percent, Ireland – 2.19 percent, Slovakia – 2.08 percent, Lithuania – 2.08 percent, Czech Republic – 2.08 percent, Croatia – 1.54 percent, Finland – 1.43 percent, Latvia – 1.43 percent, Slovenia – 1.32 percent, Denmark – 1.10 percent, Estonia – 0.77 percent, Cyprus – 0.77 percent, Malta – 0.66 percent. This distribution shows a fair distribution where the most populated EU states have higher percentages regarding the number of ambassadors, while the small states have fewer.

Besides representativeness, the variety of activities that ambassadors conduct is also crucial because it shows the diversity of the social sector where they act. The qualitative content analysis on their public profiles and focused on critical words regarding their commitments and activities revealed the following results: Awareness: 27.38 percent, Sustainability: 19.37 percent, Energy: 13.89 percent, Education: 13.29 percent, Research: 10.65 percent, Policy: 7.40 percent, Transport: 3.65 percent, Advocacy: 2.23 percent, Conservation: 1.42 percent, Waste Management: 0.71 percent, as *Figure 1* shows. Therefore, all these categories can be split into three activities: Education and raising awareness, sustainable practices and research, and public policy advocacy. Summing up, 40.67 percent of the ambassadors mentioned rising awareness and education as their main activities for 2024, which means that they will participate in public events, draft formal education courses for the curriculum, or undergo training sessions. Through these activities, they will spread the European message regarding climate change and a just transition to a green economy and try to reach a consensus among regular citizens. 30.02 percent of them



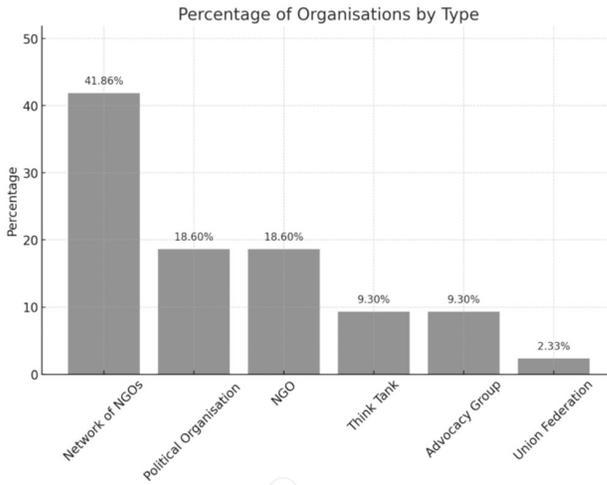
will promote sustainable practices among individuals, businesses, and member states using research tools and good practices models. 29.3 percent of the ambassadors are focused on public policy advocacy and are active in climate change-related sectors like energy, transport, nature conservation, and waste management.

Figure 1. (author's contribution)



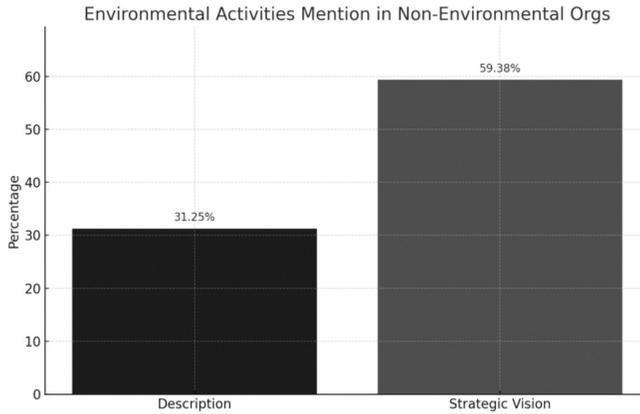
Another category of change agents vital for building a new hegemonic project in the civil society arena are organizations such as non-governmental organizations, movements, networks, or political parties. For a clear picture of the organizations that are actively promoting the European message of just transition, the paper will focus on the analysis of the European Alliance for a Just Transition, an informal group of organizations that share a common vision for a Just Transition to a social and sustainable Europe ('European Alliance for a Just Transition', n.d.). The forty-three members of this alliance were analyzed based on the type of organization, activity area, description, strategic vision, and number of members (if it was a network of organizations from EU member states). The qualitative content analysis conducted on all the information gathered about these organizations shows that 41.86 percent of them are Networks of NGOs, 18.60 percent are Political Organizations, 18.60 percent are NGOs, 9.30 percent are Think Tanks, 9.30 percent are Advocacy Groups, 2.33 percent are Union Federations (see Figure 2). Furthermore, only 25.58 percent represent environmental organizations, 55.82 percent represent other social causes (women's rights, people with disabilities, education, fight against poverty or democracy), and 18,60 percent represent political causes.

Figure 2. (author's contribution)



Because environmental organizations are already familiar with climate change, climate action, pollution, circular economy, reforestation and afforestation, environmental protection, waste management, or carbon footprint, the question is how many other organizations incorporated the climate fight into their activities? According to qualitative research, 62.5 percent of the organizations listed online that do not have “Environment” as their activity area still contain environmental activities in their descriptions or strategic visions. According to Figure 3, the impact of joining the European Alliance for a Just Transition can be seen in the distribution of presents between descriptions or strategic visions only 31.25 percent of them have environmental activities in the description, while 59.38 percent are in the strategic vision. It shows a process of adaptation and reorientation toward green activities. Another relevant aspect is that, of the forty-three members of this alliance, approximately 55 percent mention either “just transition” or “climate justice” in their descriptions or strategic visions, making them more reliant on the hegemonic project of the European Union.

Figure 3. (author's contribution)



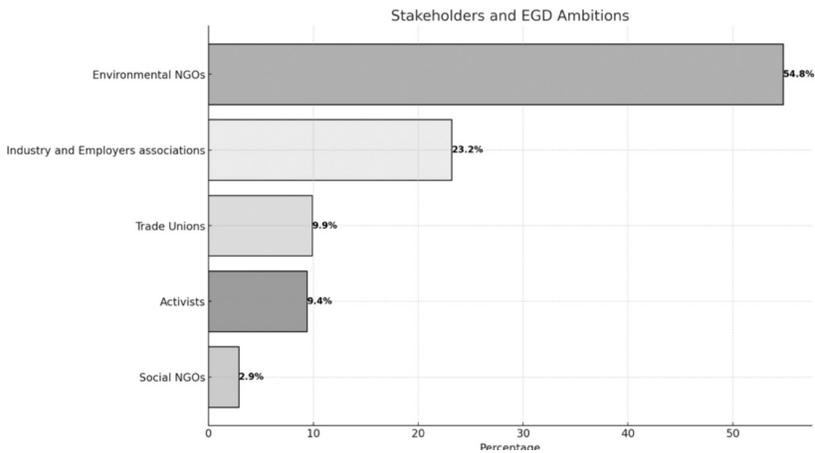
Furthermore, part of the concept of European civil society from the neo-Gramscian perspective, is private companies. Their transformative role should not be neglected, as the European Commission is asking them to get more involved in the green transition process and to support NGOs through CSR activities. However, at this moment, no formal alliance was established yet, as in September 2022, CSR Europe, together with the EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, and CEOs of leading companies met in Brussels to initiate a broader EU Business Alliance for Just Transition ('Business Leaders Join Forces with the Commission for an Inclusive Green Deal' 2022). When the alliance is established, an in-depth analysis can be conducted also on private companies.

## Discussion

After the analysis conducted for the relevant change actors in the consensus-building process for a European climate hegemony, in this chapter, the research will focus on arguing why the identified actors are so important for the proper implementation of the European Green Deal and for achieving its objectives. A relevant approach in this regard belongs to Zimmermann–Gengnagel (2023), who analyzed how different stakeholders respond to the social issues raised by the ambitions of the EGD in various social domains. Therefore, according to *Figure 4*, they identified the most important actors involved in EGD debates and transition as Environmental NGOs, composed of Climate Actions Network (70 percent), WWF, Greenpeace, and SDG News Europe (30 percent). Then, they identified the industry and employers' associations as covering 23.2 percent of the debate topics regarding EGD, trade unions at 9.9 percent, activists at 9.4 percent, and social NGOs at 2.9 percent.



Figure 4. (Zimmermann and Gengnagel 2023, 531)



Zimmermann–Gengnagel emphasize in this way the crucial role of civil society, which, along with the European Commission and Member States, is ensuring that the green transition is socially inclusive, addresses redistributive conflicts, and gains broad societal support (Zimmermann–Gengnagel 2023). The actors of civil society they identified with a significant role in EGD debates and transition overlap with the actors discussed in the current research paper: activists are understood as individuals, environmental NGOs, and social EGOs together as NGOs and networks of NGOs, industry as private companies and trade unions.

The most relevant individuals or activists that could have been identified for this research are the European Climate Pact Ambassadors. Their activity is focused on climate change and EGD transition policies, trying to engage EU citizens in debate and activities that will raise awareness of the necessity of a green transition. As this paper pointed out, the importance of CPAs is due to the high degree of representativeness and the wide variety of activities that ambassadors conduct. In terms of activities, CPAs could conduct personal activities using the identity given by the European role and could organize satellite events that are part of the European Climate Pact events ('Events', n.d.). When this research was performed, 337 satellite events were registered as follows: 94 in 2024, 32 in 2023, 83 in 2022, 122 in 2021, and 6 in 2020. These events engage EU citizens in various activities such as conferences and summits, public debates, training and workshops, info days, expert meetings, visits, exhibitions, political meetings, campaign launches, competitions, and award ceremonies.

In the case of NGOs and networks of NGOs that have the most extensive coverage, according to Zimmermann and Gengnagel in EGD debate and implementation, the research focused on the organizations that joined the European Alliance for a Just Transition. As long as the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) is not all about financing, the involvement of communities, local authorities, social partners,



and non-governmental organizations became a high priority of the European Commission (Spani 2020: 3). But the importance of NGOs in the Europeanization process is not a new subject, non-state actors being for decades essential for the EU governance process and for addressing the EU's perceived democratic deficit (Schoenefeld 2021). Alex Warleigh is developing this subject, stating that NGOs can influence the EU's policies as political campaigners because EU actors do not expect NGOs to tell what they want to hear (Warleigh 2001: 635–36).

Trade unions that are part of the organization's changing actors in this analysis agree on the need for climate neutrality. However, they are more concerned with aspects related to employment, re-employment, and the quality of jobs for the workers who lost their previous jobs due to the green transition and strongly advocate for training and reskilling programs after they faced the closure of power plants, mines or shale oil plants (Demetriades–Adăscăliței 2023: 17). This is why trade unions are not very interested in setting the climate ambition policies too high, at least not on the short term (Galgoci 2024). Nevertheless, for the transition to be just, the involvement of trade unions is vital, and they should be included in all the governance processes to ensure consensus building among workers.

Private companies in the industrial sector and other employer associations will play a significant role in the European green transition. Even if the EU's Business Alliance for Just Transition is not yet established, the EU regulation will push big companies with a high carbon footprint to be part of the change. The first legislative tool is the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) that entered into force on 5 January 2023 and pushed around 49,000 companies across Europe (including non-EU companies that generate over EUR 150 million) to report also on environmental matters ('Corporate Sustainability Reporting – European Commission', n.d.) and the second is the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism which entered into application on 1 October 2023 and tries to tackle carbon leakage by identifying the companies that moved their carbon-intensive production to countries with less climate legislation and will make sure that the carbon paid for imported goods is similar to the domestic carbon price ('Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism – European Commission', n.d.). These reforms will have a significant impact shortly as more companies will be involved in CSR environmental activities while big industrial players could invest in and develop the carbon offset market.

## Conclusions

This paper explores the role of civil society, understood through the neo-Gramscian lens, as a critical arena for contesting the hegemonic project of the fossil fuel-based economic paradigm and cultivating a counter-hegemonic discourse. The new European climate hegemony, based on the ideology of a just transition to a green economy, aims to gain popular support for the transition policies, mitigating the risk of social instability and the ascendancy of populist factions.



Therefore, the research explicitly addresses these change agents within European civil society by employing a qualitative methodology to identify the relevant actors and analyze their relevance and potential impact. Findings indicate that change agents could be identified across individuals, organizations (NGOs, networks, movements, trade unions, political organizations), and private companies. Zimmermann and Gengnagel also identified these change actors as the most influential actors in the EGD debates and transition process, with NGOs and trade unions covering 67.4 percent, industry, and employers' associations at 23.2 percent, and activists at 9.4 percent.

Regarding individuals, the most representative change actors identified are the European Climate Pact Ambassadors. They are key figures in the consensus-building process, acting voluntarily and aiming to engage individuals, communities, and organizations in climate change mitigation activities and promoting sustainable development. The 884 Climate Ambassadors profile analysis shows good representativeness at each member state and various areas they are willing to engage in during the mandate. Most ambassadors, around 40 percent, are engaged in activities like raising awareness and education, which accurately overlap to build consensus; a third of them is promoting sustainable practices among individuals, businesses, and member states, while the other third is focused on public policy advocacy being active in climate change related sectors like energy, transport, nature conservation, and waste management.

Regarding the analysis conducted on the organizations that joined the European Alliance for a Just Transition, it shows a dominance of NGOs, networks of NGOs, and political organizations that are adapting their discourse and strategic vision to climate-related topics, while more than half of all members were mentioning "just transition" or "climate justice" in their descriptions or strategic visions. After excluding about 25 percent of these organizations from analysis because they are already involved in environmental activities, the paper revealed that 31,25 percent of them already mentioned environmental activities in their description while 59,38 percent were updating the strategic vision for future actions. The private companies that could be essential change agents are not yet constituted in a formal alliance, as the process started in September 2022. Climate topics are now part of the CSR activities of individual companies.

Answering the research question of this paper, who are the change agents within European civil society that have aligned with the alliance and how fostering a counter-hegemonic discourse against the traditional economic model, the study showed that the most significant change agents are Climate Pact Ambassadors as an individual acting on a volunteer base and perform a variety of activities and different type of organizations that joined the European Alliance for a Just Transition and that are adapting discourse and strategic vision to climate-related topics. The way these change actors are fostering a counter-hegemonic discourse is diverse. CPAs use their national or local influence and recognition to engage people, while the organizations analyzed use public and private funds to perform their activities.



Other secondary conclusions from this research are that EGD is still in the initial phase, and not all the networks are set. Private companies and trade unions still lack more attention from the EU's institutions, but as the research showed, more regulations are to be implemented. However, there are two main pillars of consensus building for a European climate hegemony: individual activists and organizations like NGOs and Network of NGOs. Besides these entities, private companies have an enormous potential to play a key role, while trade unions will remain essential partners in social dialogue.

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